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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1159  
INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS IMMEDIATE  
RHHMUNA/CDRUSPACOM HONOLULU HI IMMEDIATE  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC IMMEDIATE  
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RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC IMMEDIATE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 002199

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: FIVE ESTRADA SUPPORTERS ARRESTED ON CHARGES OF  
REBELLION

REF: MANILA 2193

11. (SBU) Summary: On May 22, Philippine military and police forces arrested five supporters of former President Joseph Estrada, charging them with rebellion and accusing the group of plotting to assassinate four members of President Arroyo's Cabinet. Due to a lack of evidence, the men were later released, though charges are still pending and a preliminary hearing is set for early June. In response, the Senate is stalling important defense budget legislation while it pursues an inquiry, and opposition figures and the Philippine Commission on Human Rights have expressed concern. End Summary.

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Catch and Release  
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12. (U) On May 22, Philippine military and police forces arrested five supporters of former President Joseph Estrada, charging them with rebellion and accusing the group of plotting to assassinate four members of the Arroyo Cabinet. The men -- nicknamed the "Erap 5" -- were taken from the Metro Manila home of Virgilio Eustaquio -- a leader of Estrada's Union of the Masses for Democracy and Justice party -- where they were holding a meeting. Initially, the men were thought to have been abducted after the government repeatedly denied any involvement in their disappearance. On May 24, the government admitted it was holding the five, but released the group the next day after Justice Secretary Raul Gonzalez cited a lack of sufficient evidence to detain them. Nonetheless, the charges are still pending and a preliminary hearing has been set for June 6.

13. (U) Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) spokesman Colonel Tristan Kison has said government agents were initially after only one man -- Ruben Dionisio, allegedly a New People's Army (NPA) member -- but decided to arrest the four others as well. The AFP claims the arrests were the result of a tip given by another alleged NPA member, Delfin de Guzman, who was detained by the government on May 11 (reftel). Presidential Press Secretary Ignacio Bunye has defended the arrests, stating that it was a "preemptive move" to defend the allegedly targeted Cabinet members and that if the accused are innocent, "they can prove their innocence in court." Media reports have identified the four targets as Presidential Chief of Staff Mike Defensor, National Security Advisor Norberto Gonzales, Justice Secretary Raul Gonzalez, and Public Works Secretary Hermogenes Ebdane.

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Reaction  
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14. (U) In response, the Philippine Senate has deferred approval of this year's P47.5 billion defense budget, pending investigation into the arrests. Opposition Senator Panfilo Lacson has said the Senate will schedule a May 29 hearing to question military leaders, saying that a full explanation of the arrests is warranted prior to budget approval. Former President Estrada has condemned the, "patently criminal abduction" of his supporters and dismissed government claims of Dionisio's links to the NPA. Philippine Commission on Human Rights Commissioner Wilhelm Soriano also voiced concern over the arrests, stating, "the manner in which it was done" was not consistent with due process of the law.

15. (U) Dionisio -- the government's main target -- has accused the arresting soldiers and police officers of torture, claiming he had been beaten and subject to electric shocks for several hours. On May 23, Dionisio showed television news reporters bruises and bites - allegedly by fire ants -- that he asserted were inflicted upon him after his arrest. Media reports say Dionisio and the other men are expected to file complaints against their arresting officers.

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Comment  
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16. (SBU) The arrest of the "Erap 5" has been widely covered by the Philippine media and has given Congressional opposition members cause to delay important defense budget legislation. The Arroyo Administration continues to defend its position that the arrests were justified, and is moving forward on a preliminary investigation. The alleged violations of human rights against Dionisio, if true, would

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be troubling and may provoke a backlash against the Arroyo government. Mission will continue to monitor the accusations of torture.  
Kenney